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Growers' Gamble

Are cities missing a bet by giving short shrift to farmers markets?

By Isabelle Groc

Apples, squash, jam, bread, cheese, garlic: These are some of the delicious items sold on a quiet residential street in Vancouver, British Columbia. During the city's Winter Farmers Market, which operates twice a month between November and April, 40 vendors sell their products under tents set up in the street and on tables inside an adjacent community building.



The sounds of live music, laughter, and excited conversations get mixed together and create a joyful atmosphere. This market is the latest addition to the four seasonal farmers markets that bring locally grown food to various city neighborhoods and attract about 10,000 people per week.

Vancouver resident Lisa Tilson is passionate about buying local food and about shopping at farmers markets. "You get to meet the farmers. They will tell you things that are really special, how they relate to their animals, or why they started. I really love that," says the 26 year-old University of British Columbia student. On each visit to the market, Tilson spends at least \$100 and an hour or more, not only to buy food but also to socialize and listen to the farmers stories.

All across North America, people like Tilson have rediscovered the experience of shopping at farmers markets, an ancient institution that has enjoyed an incredible revival. There were more than 3,700 farmers markets in the U.S. in 2004, an addition of 2,000 markets in 10 years. California alone has about 500 of them.

The popularity of the markets stems from the fact that they provide multiple benefits. They offer access to fresh, local, healthy food; they connect small farmers with consumers in a unique community gathering; they provide valuable outlets for local growers; and they bring people together and build social capital in neighborhoods.

"Farmers markets are like the new church where people come once a week to meet each other, exchange information, and gather as human beings," says Tara McDonald, the executive director of Your Local Farmers Market Society, which operates the Vancouver markets.

Stepchild?

For all the great benefits they provide, farmers markets are also vulnerable. Many markets fail each year. A 2006 Oregon State University study of the failures found that while 62 new markets started in Oregon between 1998 and 2005, 32 did not reopen. Among the factors associated with market failures are the small size of the markets, the shortage of products and lack of diversity in the markets' offerings, the high turnover in management staff, and a lack of stable funding. Further, cities have generally not done much to support farmers markets in the communities that host them.

"With very few exceptions, everybody loves the markets. But there is a huge gap between the amount of love for farmers markets and the amount of support," notes Chris Heitmann, a senior associate with the Project for Public Spaces, a New York-based nonprofit organization that helps create and sustain public places that build communities, including public markets.

While the explosive growth has created a great economic opportunity for small local farmers, growers can't keep up with the demand in some regions. Mary Forstbauer, who has operated an organic farm in British Columbia for the last 31 years, sells about 75 percent of her products at these markets. While she is grateful for the significant income stream that markets have brought to her business, she says it's a stretch to meet the growing demand.

"In the Vancouver area, most markets are run on Saturday, and I am asked to be at 12 markets on the same day," Forstbauer explains. As the president of the BC Association of Farmers Markets, she engages in outreach efforts to recruit new farmers. She says that only two percent of farmers in the province participate in markets. The others cannot overcome barriers related to the setup costs, the time away from the farm, the lifestyle adjustments, or the people skills that markets require.

In communities where the number of markets has grown significantly, some local growers abandon the markets when they see their profitability decline. And because market managers need to keep a critical mass of product offerings in order to attract customers, they may sometimes rent to new vendors who are not local growers but simply resell products that they have bought elsewhere. Such practices undermine the integrity of the markets and the trust consumers place in these institutions as places where they can buy fresh local products from the farmers that grow them.

In an attempt to protect consumers against such potential misrepresentations, the state of California has certified farmers markets since 1977. Certification indicates the markets are places where genuine farmers sell their crops directly to the public. However, some of the participating farmers feel that the regulations are not always observed.

Andy Griffin, who operates Mariquita Farm, near Watsonville, California, used to sell his produce in up to 22 different farmers markets. He gradually abandoned the markets and recently gave up his stall at the prestigious Ferry Plaza Farmers Market in San Francisco. While Griffin found a more profitable outlet for his products through a Community Supported Agriculture group, he also became disenchanted with farmers markets as an institution.

"It is really sad when they start a farmers market in a community that can't or won't support it," Griffin says, noting that farmers will drop out. "The public thinks they are buying directly from the farmers," he says, "but they are really buying resold stuff from resellers

who are masquerading as farmers."

Down side of temporary use

In addition to struggling with market integrity issues, market managers often have to operate at temporary locations and get no formal acknowledgment from the city. Farmers markets typically begin as grassroots initiatives and are led by a group of enthusiasts who want to promote sustainable local food in their neighborhoods; they set up markets in parks, streets, or private parking lots without receiving any help from the host city. This often means that markets can be shut down without notice when neighbors complain about noise or parking issues.

"The biggest threat to markets is that they lose their location," Heitmann says. Ensuring some form of security for a market to operate on a specific site is critical. When a market has to move, it virtually has to rebuild the operation from scratch, as considerable investment goes into branding a particular location as the destination for the market.

The potential for failure at the new location is high — and a disincentive for farmers. "I want to be able to control the environment I am in," says Andy Griffin. "In a farmers market, you can do a great job for a long time and the public can love you, but they can vanish overnight for reasons that are thoroughly out of your control."

Cities typically treat farmers markets as private initiatives and have rarely taken the steps to formalize the relationships between these grassroots institutions and the spaces they occupy in the local communities. "Cities do very little about farmers markets," says Heather Wooten, a planning and policy associate with Oakland-based Public Health Law & Policy, an organization that provides training, technical assistance, and legal and policy tools to advance public health goals. "It is a missed opportunity. They don't plan for it," she explains.

Many cities lack any policy that addresses the long-term security of the markets' tenure at a particular site, and farmers markets are often left to operate under the radar without permits or appropriate zoning. For Mark Francis, a professor of landscape architecture at the University of California, Davis, farmers markets have been marginalized. "They are always seen as temporary uses of land until something better comes along. They are put in leftover spaces in cities under freeways and parking lots," he says.

In Portland, Oregon, where there are currently 14 markets, the zoning code does not define farmers markets, according to Steve Cohen, manager of food policy and programs at the Portland Office of Sustainable Development. In some zones, the code places restrictions on outdoor sales, seasonal sales, or other temporary activities. As a result, in some cases markets do not operate as allowed uses and always face the risk of closure if a complaint is made and the city decides to apply the code.

Vancouver's four markets operate in the parking lots of local parks and via street closures through special event permits that are renewed annually. No bylaws currently acknowledge farmers markets as rightful public uses of parkland or city space. Permits can be altered at any time, and there is no long-term guarantee that the sites the markets occupy will be available the following year.

On parkland the markets compete for limited parking space with other park users. And in Vancouver, two of the current locations on which the markets operate are development sites for the upcoming 2010 Winter Olympic Games. That situation places the markets' security at risk.

"There is nothing that guarantees the permits will be renewed year to year in those locations in any kind of consistent way," explains Tara McDonald. "The livelihood of hundreds of farmers is hanging in the balance every year."

Time for a change

After operating the markets in the city for 13 years, the Your Local Farmers Market Society now feels it is time for a change. The organization has recently launched a campaign to draft a bylaw that will acknowledge the rightful existence of farmers markets in the city, ensure their long-term security in existing sites, and define a process for expansion to new locations.

"We are interested in real security, and we are interested in having this written and making our place in Vancouver's institutions," McDonald says.

But the city of Vancouver holds a different view. It has established a food policy council to support the development of a local food system and has concluded that the long-term security of farmers markets is derived from their community support. Zoning changes are not a priority, says Devorah Kahn, the city's food policy coordinator.

"The farmers markets are actually operating quite well and on the surface it doesn't seem they are having challenges," says Kahn. "Their perspective is different. They want to come to the front door and get legitimate so they don't have to deal with the back door entrance every year."

Cut the red tape

In many cases, market managers must navigate city bureaucracies in order to obtain special permits for markets. In his upcoming book, *Farmers' Markets: Success, Failure and Management Ecology*, Garry Stephenson lists more than 20 entities the Portland Farmers Market must work with to operate four markets in the city.

In New Orleans, organizers of the Crescent City Farmers Market also had to jump through some hoops when setting up shop in 1995. That involved working with the planning commission to set an interim zoning district in a few neighborhoods and persuading the city council to pass a resolution to set up the open-air market as a "festival" because festivals are exempt from the restrictive Louisiana Health Department requirements.

"At first sight, farmers markets are very simple, ancient mechanisms where you have a public space, you bring in farmers, you bring in consumers, and it runs itself," says Richard McCarthy, vice president of the Farmers Market Coalition and cofounder of the Crescent City Farmers Market. "But you discover very quickly that there are some critical issues regarding criteria, management, customer service, food handling, licensing, zoning — all of these issues that market organizers don't have the skill set or the organizational

capacity to handle in a systematic way."

Even well established institutions like Greenmarket in New York City do not have long-term security. Out of the 46 greenmarkets that currently operate there, 19 are located on parklands under a 10-year user agreement with the parks department. The agreement could theoretically end at any time, although this is highly unlikely, according to Michael Hurwitz, the director of the greenmarkets. He notes that the markets enjoy community support and have brought substantial benefits to areas such as Union Square, between midtown and lower Manhattan.

Although Hurwitz believes the current arrangement works well, he also says that the markets' continued security is a concern. Securing a long-term lease would require special permission from the state legislature, an option that Hurwitz has recently begun to explore. "The longer you know you can be somewhere, the more peace of mind everybody has," he says. "Although I cannot foresee a future without our markets, the more we can work to secure that long-term future, the better it will be for us and for city residents."

Cities can provide organizational support for the markets, help streamline the permitting process, provide guidance with health regulations, incorporate farmers markets within broader food access policies, secure permanent sites, and mediate impacts such as parking. According to author Garry Stephenson, cities could also employ market managers, particularly in low-income neighborhoods where farmers markets play an important role in providing access to healthy food but also have difficulty attracting farmers.

"Cities are walking a tight rope between embracing the markets — and supporting them as much as possible — and not regulating or bureaucratizing them so that they become encumbered in terms of their development and creativity," Stephenson says.

Positive focus

A policy initiative that removed barriers to the operation of farmers markets in San Francisco parks became law in January 2007. The legislation ensures that the markets will not interfere with regular usage of park grounds, play areas, or athletic fields. It also mandates an assessment of which areas in the city are most in need of the markets, including low-income areas. Without such legislation in place to define a clear process, some community groups could not open the markets, says Heather Wooten.

For Randii MacNear, the manager of Davis Farmers Market in Davis, California, farmers markets are at a crossroads today. "We are at this point where we need to legitimize the farmers market industry as a real industry," she says.

The market that MacNear manages is one of those rare examples of a productive partnership between a market and a city. Davis's farmers market is the first in California to be designed as a permanent element of a city park, and to enjoy the use of a covered pavilion.

Davis Farmers Market started as a grassroots initiative in 1977. It first located on a street next to Central Park and had three farmers and 50 customers. Today it is a prime gathering spot, attracts up to 10,000 people each week, and features 140 vendors per year. According to MacNear, it is crucial to nurture relationships with key local stakeholders in order to build trust and community support.

"I make the market match community values," she says. "We find ways that the market is not only a place to shop for fruits and vegetables, but it is a place where the community can come and accomplish their goals."

The strategy has paid off. The city of Davis views the market as one of its greatest assets and helps mitigate some of the daily challenges the market faces, such as dealing with parking or noise.

"The market is something that everybody loves and if nuisances arise, we work through them and manage them," explains Ken Hiatt, Davis's deputy city manager. Recently the city shortened parking time limits to make more parking slots available for shoppers on market days. While the city does not provide operational funding for the market, it has designated liaison staff to assist the market manager with any issues that come up.

"The city gives us the support because the market gives back to the community," explains MacNear. "It isn't us and them; they really feel that the market is the city."

Isabelle Groc is a Vancouver-based freelance writer and photographer who focuses on cities and the environment.

Images: In Vancouver, the Winter Farmers Market and three other seasonal Markets attract about 10,000 shoppers each week. Photo by Isabelle Groc.

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